

## Plenary 1

# Enhancing classroom language learning through technology

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It is significant that the opening plenary session of the EQUALS conference 2011 was about technology in language teaching. It suggests that educational technology is no longer a fringe course enhancement, of interest to only enthusiastic 'technophile' teachers, learners and managers, but rather, it has an importance for everyone concerned in language teaching.

The aim of this plenary was to provide a concise overview of new technology in teaching. The talk first provided the background to this area by making six statements on technology; then, six common educational technologies were critically analysed; participants spent some time discussing six of the many controversies in this area and the plenary concluded with six practical teaching ideas.

## Six statements on technology

### Statement one: "The times they are a-changing...."

This is a time of significant change. Although Prensky's (2001) distinction between digital immigrants and digital natives is falling out of favour, it is nevertheless useful to help us see the way our younger students' minds work. Our children have, after all, grown up in the digital age; many have never known a world without the Internet.

The term Web 2.0 was used. It implies that the web is full of 'user-generated content' provided by the writers of blogs and wikis; communication across the web takes place with tools such as the now-familiar Skype. Today's course book is much more than a book; the term 'course book' can include regular e-lessons distributed across the web, web-based support materials, CD-ROM, podcasts and now, vodcasts or 'video podcasts'.

When discussing the diffusion of technologies, Pete drew attention to Roger's adoption curve. This can help you to decide whether your institution is an innovator, an early adopter of technology, part of the early majority or the late majority or (maybe even) a laggard.

### Statement two: Multiple perspectives

The area of TELL (technology-enhanced language learning) is highly controversial; there are so many ways of looking at technology in teaching. These could be described as 'multiple perspectives'. The following example illustrates 'switching perspectives':

"I once asked a group of teachers in the UK what they thought about CD-ROMs. 'Not much' was their response. I posed the same question to group of English language teachers in Poland, learning Polish. Their response was overwhelmingly positive! Why? They were themselves using a beginners' disc to learn Polish: practising numbers, colours, the days of the week etc. They had simply 'switched perspective', in this case, from 'teacher' to 'learner'. As language learners, the Polish teachers recognised CD-ROM is a valuable learning tool.

Perspectives include the following: theoretical, teacher, learner, teacher trainer, director of studies/academic manager, school manager, publisher, instructional designer. Not surprisingly, arguments arise as stakeholders tend to look at technology from their own particular viewpoint.

### **Statement three: Technology has changed the teaching and learning of languages forever**

Even if computers themselves are not used within a given educational context, they have provided insights into the way language works. In the area of vocabulary, for example, concordancers (powerful search tools used to analyse texts) have given corpus linguists new insights into 'collocation' and 'word frequency', and revolutionised how course books are written. Language teaching authors use concordances to provide example sentences of real language, as opposed to inventing unrealistic dialogues, as was common thirty years ago.

### **Statement four: Technology and the range of course types**

Technology has opened up a wider range of course options, often for people who previously could not take a face-to-face course due to distance, or inconvenient class times. Increasing numbers of language learners are choosing to take online language courses. The concept of online teaching is broad, ranging from the use of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for course delivery at a university to desktop video-conferencing with Skype, not to mention teaching in a virtual world. *Language Lab* is an example of a virtual school operating in the virtual world Second Life.

### **Statement five: the importance of attitude**

Using technology involves both knowledge about the tools (e.g. "what is an interactive whiteboard (IWB)?") and hands-on skills in the classroom (actually using the board in a lesson). But how do we feel about using IWBs? In addition to knowledge and skills, it has been said that it is your attitude which determines whether the input derived from training in technology will produce change in teaching practice (Freeman: 1989). Teachers positive about using technologies in language teaching are already using them!

### **Statement six: the importance of pedagogy**

No matter how enthusiastic one might be about technology, teachers do (and should) look beyond the 'wow' factor, towards what pedagogical benefits are to be gained in the classroom. One effect of using a blended learning approach is that teachers can decide which activities are more appropriately done in the classroom (such as discussion) and which might be done on the digital platform (practising discrete items of grammar, for example).

## **A critical analysis of six technologies**

Pete then explored six technologies which are current, useful and interesting: podcasts, interactive whiteboards, blogs, wikis, Virtual Learning Environments (VLE's) and M-learning. These were briefly analysed, with a few positive features mentioned, as well as some caveats.

#### **a. Podcasts**

A podcast is an audio file that is made available on the Internet for download and playback using a computer or a mobile device such as an iPod. Because podcasts can be easily copied to an mp3 player, they allow for listening 'on the move'. There are a wide range of different kinds of podcast; many language teaching course book CVD-ROMs now include mp3 files. Teachers and students can even create their own podcasts.

#### **b. Interactive whiteboards (IWBs)**

In the plenary, through a show of hands, it was ascertained that penetration of interactive whiteboards was low in the Czech Republic. Research has shown that with an IWB,

memorable presentations are possible, using the screen reveal tool (Schmid: 2009). Similarly, lesson review is easy, since the teacher has access to all the flip-charts created on the IWB in any given lesson.

There are many issues connected to the IWB. Perhaps the most frequently-cited objection is that of cost. The IWB is sometimes criticised for hastening the return to the teacher-centred classroom. Of course, it doesn't have to be teacher-centred - it just depends on how it is used.

#### c. Blogs

Blogs started life as on-line diaries, originally maintained by an individual. Today, there are corporate bloggers, and most English language teaching publishers have their own blog. Blogs can include graphics and video. Blog entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. Teachers can give student feedback using their own blog; some students have a blog in the target language, for example, English. Class blogs are often highly-motivating as they can offer students a chance to display their work for a wide range of readers. One issue connected with blogs is whether or not teachers should correct student blog entries, and if so how.

#### d. Wikis

A wiki is a collaborative website that allows the easy creation and editing of any number of interlinked web pages. The most famous wiki is, of course, Wikipedia. Wikis can be useful when practising collaborative writing, the teacher can click on the 'history' button to see changes. However, it is important to remember that not all students are happy with the idea of collaborating with peers on areas such as accuracy, and prefer input and feedback to come directly from the teacher.

#### e. Virtual Learning Environment

A Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) is "a collection of integrated tools enabling the management of online learning, providing a delivery mechanism, student tracking, assessment and access to resources" (JISC infoNet). Moodle and Blackboard are examples of VLE's. A VLE contains communication tools such as a bulletin board, quizzes and tracking tools. VLEs are commonly used in universities to supplement traditional face-to-face classroom activities, commonly known as Blended Learning (Sharma: 2010).

#### f. M-learning

M-learning stands for mobile learning. One definition, taken from Wikipedia, is "learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies". There are many different contexts for m-learning, including the classroom (e.g. students using their smart-phones for research) and receiving an 'e-mail of the day' from the teacher.

In terms of hardware, the term m-learning can be used to refer to a range of devices such as: the mobile-phone or Smart-phone; the iPod, iPod touch or mp3 player; the laptop, notebook or netbook; the Tablet PC, iPad or Samsung Galaxy; and an e-book reader. Sometimes, the term is used to include Learner Response Devices (used to vote in class) and electronic translators. The current discussion on M-Learning seems to revolve around the appearance of 'apps' or applications for devices; these include language learning apps, for grammar practice, dictionary apps and real world apps.

### Six controversial areas

Pete Sharma set up a short pair-work activity for participants to discuss a number of contentious areas, as follows:

- Will the course book disappear?
- Should schools buy an IWB?
- Should students have their mobile phones switched off in class?
- Should students use electronic translators in class?
- Should classroom learners be supported with VLE's?
- Should teachers use YouTube in their teaching?

Although these areas were not explored in any depth, they excited much discussion. The list of questions above could form part of a teacher training session run locally.

## Six practical ideas

Pete finished the plenary by looking at six practical ideas: grammar, vocabulary and the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing.

### a. Grammar

A teacher using an interactive whiteboard can apply the "Infinite clone tool" to an image, so they can instantly clone it (copy it) as many times as they wish. One practical teaching idea is to apply the clone tool to a smiley face and an unhappy face. The teacher displays a number of sentences, some correct and others incorrect. Students then drag the smiley face or the unhappy face to each sentence, depending on whether they think it is right or wrong. This type of interactive exercise can encourage an 'awareness-raising' approach to grammar.

### b. Vocabulary

There is a popular website called Wordle. Using Wordle allows teachers to select text and paste it into the box in order to generate a 'word cloud'. The 'word cloud' is based on word frequency, with the most frequently-occurring words appearing larger. This is a great way to generate interest in a text, or to review it later.

### c. Listening

The website [www.TED.com](http://www.TED.com) contains a vast number of talks on technology, education and design. Many talks are accompanied by an interactive transcript, so students can listen and follow the presentation at the same time. By clicking on one sentence in the transcript, they can go directly to this part of the presentation.

### d. Reading

One practical idea is to annotate a text using the IWB pens. Firstly, students read the text in their course book. In what has become known as 'head-up' learning, the teacher using courseware running on an IWB can bring up the same text on-screen and enlarge it. The text can then be annotated on-screen, using the pen tools and/or the highlighter. For example, the teacher may wish to focus on instances of the simple past tense, so students can come up and highlight any instances of the use of verbs with a 'regular' past form in one colour, and those with an 'irregular' past form in another. The teacher can elicit whole class approval, additions or corrections.

### e. Speaking

Learner Voting Devices can be used in conjunction with an interactive whiteboard. The voting can be anonymous, and can produce the excitement of the well-known programme 'Who wants to be a millionaire'. Voting devices can be used in quizzes, grammar review, and fluency.

#### f. Writing

Teachers can support their writing course using a class wiki. These can be set up quite quickly and, as with blogs, there are many free services. The wiki enables students to collaborate on writing a text at a distance, between classes.

The plenary session provided a lead-in to a more practical ideas exchange workshop, as well as producing food for thought for the closing panel discussion.

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